

COLONIAL SOUTHERN WOMEN

Well-to-do families saw to it that their daughters acquired an education that included practical, literary, and ornamental skills. These included cooking, sewing, and household management; reading, writing, and perhaps a little arithmetic and French; and a number of other niceties such as polished manners, musical training, dancing, drawing, and fancy needlework. Parents from the middle range of Virginia society concentrated their daughters' training on domestic skills useful to running a household or a family business such as keeping tavern for which some proficiency in reading and writing would also be an asset. In imitation of the gentry, up-and-coming tradesmen and merchants sometimes paid for music and dance lessons for their daughters. Further down the scale, poor free parents trained their daughters and sons to whatever job was at hand as soon as they were old enough, a welcome addition to the family labor pool. There was likely little time to spend on teaching the rudiments of reading, even if one or both parents knew their letters. Slave women were trained in the skills that would be most useful to their masters; literacy was seldom among them.

For every gentlewoman such as Ann Nicholas, whose letters to her sister in England were admired by English gentlemen for their high style and beautiful penmanship there was a young woman of lesser status such as Maria Rind, who wrote nearly illegibly and labored to express herself in crudely constructed sentences. For every girl who learned very basic reading or knew how to sign her name, there were myriad others who lived quite comfortably in that largely oral society without being able to read or write. In Williamsburg, for every free black or slave girl at the Bray School who learned to speak properly and to read the Bible and navigate the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, there were many more who could not read. From their mothers and African-Virginian adults, they learned the ins and outs of the work and master-approved behaviors that would dominate their lives.

In some sense colonial girls of nearly all ranks spent a great deal of time learning the finer points of housewifery or the basics of household work. Most could have agreed, at least in some measure, with Mary Jones who wrote to her cousin Frances Bland on the eve of her marriage in 1769 that the cares of a family and domestic business “deprived thought of its native freedom” and made thinking about anything new impossible.

As noted earlier, there is another side to this coin. For every man who admired an accomplished woman for her breadth of knowledge, there were others who felt very differently. The rejected Rev. Samuel Henley wrote that women had no business commenting on questions of theology that had bewildered men in all ages of the Church. Thomas Mann Randolph found too much education in a woman disagreeable and could not see that education was of any intrinsic value to women.

Evidence about education for colonial women has come down to us mainly through reports by the women themselves in their letters and diaries, and recollections of their contemporaries as well as their husbands, children, and other kin. Of course, that picture becomes less distinct as we descend through the ranks of the hierarchical Virginia society where the legal code and court records provide only the barest details. Not the kind of information that lends itself to scientific analysis or quantification, we are left to piece together a picture of the learning experience for colonial girls.

Resource-Colonial Williamsburg Foundation